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ABSTRACT

Mass communication programs can focus on concepts, philosophies and the ability to synthesize information while providing education and experience for entry-level jobs in mass media industries. "Hands-on" instruction, in the form of media workshops and internships, have the ability to stimulate a student's involvement in the learning process. The purpose of experiential learning should be the application and integration of concepts and philosophies that students acquire in the traditional classroom experiences. The media industry often expect a steady supply of inexpensive or free labor from media education programs. Students need to bring an attitude to internships that prevents them from blindly accepting the status quo. Interns should get a complete picture of the corporate structure of the facility, get experience in a wide variety of tasks in a number of job categories, and have an observational proximity to view technology, technical processes, creative work, and decision-making. Students who expect to go on to graduate school, who cannot afford to live independently while interning, or who are locked into rigid schedules can get experiential learning through workshops or laboratories. Media laboratory classes benefit those whose career interests have not yet crystallized and for those who do not feel that a career in traditional media organizations is attractive. Experiential learning provides practical information students need to get entry level jobs, but could also provide evidence to justify the existence of the media program. (RS)

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE NEW PROFESSIONALISM

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE NEW PROFESSIONALISM

BY NORMAN J. MEDOFF, PH.D.

Imagine an assessment study of an undergraduate program in mass communication where survey information is gathered from alumni of the program. The alumni report, through a mail survey, showed that they liked and respected their professors, enjoyed the multidiscipline, liberal arts orientation of the classes and generally felt that they are better people, citizens and media consumers as a result of taking a major in mass communication at your university. The only problem was that they could not compete for entry level jobs with students from community colleges or other universities that had lots of hands-on "training". They feel that their major did not help them prepare for their first job in the field of communication and that they finally had to take a job selling life insurance or shoes or time share condominiums. The alumni continued on by stating that they would feel comfortable discussing policy with TV network moguls or even appearing before a Senate Task Force to discuss violence in the media or the portrayal of minorities in prime time television. But they didn't have a good enough resume "reel" to show the news director or production manager, felt totally intimidated by the sight of the facility's editing suite and

didn't know how to close a media time sale. What went wrong?

If this survey came from alumni of my program I could easily construct an argument by first using a quote from Gomery (1986), "Why not educate students so they can adapt to whatever real world they enter and let businesses teach the specifics?" I would further reason that 1) we don't train, we educate; 2) some students can take at least two years to put together a decent resume reel, so we can't get into that "business"; and 3) if a student is frightened by machines or technology they should have majored in philosophy. Besides, our program cannot spend the money to keep pace with industry's ability to buy the latest and most expensive media hardware...so we don't try. Although my colleagues might appreciate my feeble humor, it doesn't help the students and ultimately the Board of Regents might decide that we are not responding to the needs of the student or the needs of the state. By eschewing the hands-on component of mass communication, we may jeopardize the longevity of the program. In addition, the perception of our colleagues in other disciplines in the university is that we prepare students for jobs as button pushers, sleazy deejays and "weather guys and gals". If we are not even doing this well, what are we doing?

Sam Becker said that mass communication programs should not be preparing students for their first job, but their last one. Curricula should not be culminated by a capstone course in closing the spot buy of a radio station or putting on a nightly

newscast, but instead a course that probes questions like what mass communication is all about, where the media is going and why, how the concentration and control of the media will affect its form, content and delivery and how mass communication affects society and individuals (for example, The Role of the Press in a Democratic Society). But if we can't help get students onto a career path to help them become the decision makers of the future, their major education may go largely unused. Obviously, we as educators need to provide some method of preparing students for their first job as well as their last.

Programs that provide a strong liberal arts oriented, information age media education that focuses on concepts, issues and philosophy and those that focus on traditional media are not mutually exclusive--they can focus on concepts, philosophies and the ability the synthesize information while providing education and experience for entry level jobs in mass media industries. The latter can be provided without sacrificing the former.

Choices

In Media Education and the Liberal Arts, Bob Blanchard and Bill Christ (1993) acknowledge that "hands-on" instruction is essential for media education programs. Further, they state that there are two options for obtaining this experience. First is the media workshop or laboratory and the second is an internship. Both of these options have the ability to stimulate a student's involvement in the learning process and a program of studies. It

often is the only opportunity for students to completely design what experiential focus they would like to have. If the process is begun early enough a student should be able to get deeply involved in this aspect of their own undergraduate experience. This "student involvement" is cited by the NIE as being perhaps the most important of the three conditions necessary for "improving undergraduate education". I don't think that the most important aspect of this is that the student gets to choose among alternatives. Rather, it is the student working closely with faculty, perhaps for the first time, and seeing that a personal interest in the student's learning and career success is being shown by a faculty member. The student can become an active participant...a decision maker in the educational process. Aside from choosing the major and which liberal studies (general education) courses and electives to take, this may be the first and possibly the only opportunity to make decisions of this type.

Media Workshops and Laboratories

Media workshops and laboratories often get ignored by students who select their classes when the schedule of classes for the next semester is distributed. These classes are often given neutral titles (like Media Lab and Media Workshop) which often do nothing to explain why a student should take the course. This non-description is common because the course often changes from one semester to the next and/or the format of the course permits a wide variety of activities. Also, these courses are

listed ambiguously as either variable credit, one credit or even no credit. Theses courses should be publicized with a flyer that explains what the options are for the following semester or at some type of majors group meeting that gives the supervisors/faculty an opportunity to explain the goals and practices of the workshop or laboratory. It is common to see workshops tied to a specific media vehicle on campus, e.g., the student paper, the NPR affiliate or student radio station.

Internships

Most people do equate experiential learning in media education with traditional internships. But if we consider that a large majority of these are traditional broadcast internships, it is important to reconsider how these are congruent with media education in the information age. After all, broadcast is merely one system of delivery of audio and video information. Across the country, there are less than 2000 television stations who can hire our students. Every year, broadcast and mass communication programs graduate more students than the total work force in the entire broadcast industry not to mention the small number of openings (which are generally entry level). By contrast, there are more than 10,000 corporations, independent production houses, governmental agencies and organizations that have in-house audio and video operations. Despite the wide spread recession of recent years, there are more many job opportunities in the non-broadcast sector. In addition, the pay is better, the skill

level sought is higher (Bolduc & Medoff, 1990) and opportunities to demonstrate a variety of competencies are more frequent in non-broadcast situations. Non-broadcast internship sponsors often want students who can communicate and demonstrate skills in editing, writing and producing while the broadcast internships (and entry level jobs) request students who can operate a camera, usually a studio camera. It also seems that broadcast internships are usually unpaid, while the non-broadcast ones do pay.

Timing and Purpose

The purpose of experiential learning should be the application and integration of concepts and philosophies that students acquire in the traditional classroom experiences. Students should also have some basic skills that can be practiced and enhanced in an experiential setting with the proper supervision of a professional, a professor or, in a student media situation, a more experienced student. This implies that students have a chance to learn the concepts, construct a philosophy and learn some basic skills in classes. I think that this takes a student three years of college with a liberal education in a communication major. Therefore, the best time for a student to engage in experiential learning for credit is after their junior year. The actual plan for the timing of the experience should occur when the advisor and the student meet to design a plan for the student's completion of the program. Some

students need a look at a broadcast facility and its processes before deciding which career path to pursue. Some students excel at writing and editing while others have insightful and mature news judgement and should be assignment editors or news directors. These students might want to take an internship early on, perhaps right after their junior year. Others might benefit from taking a workshop with the campus television operation. Here the benefit of the experiential learning process is self discovery as well as career preparation. Students who know what part of the communication process is interesting to them and feel both confident and competent should wait until just before graduation to allow them to concentrate fully on the experience and use it as a stepping stone to their first job. This can be an off campus internship in a market that they expect will be the one they choose for a first job, or a position of responsibility in a campus media operation.

Having said the above, I must now acknowledge the "universitycentric" attitude that it espouses. What should the community college students do? Career preparation is often the main reason that they chose to attend college. Many communication students in two year schools want to know more about career opportunities. Many want to know if a career in the communication industry matches their view of reality and perception of their abilities and interests. Obviously, these students should have experiential opportunities to allow them to sample the professional media reality. Again, these experiences

should come from on-campus media facilities when possible. If off campus experiences are appropriate, students should have a mixture of process observing as well as the more vocationally oriented, hands-on experiences.

It would be foolhardy to ignore the fact that experiential learning is career preparation behavior. Parents often undermine the high minded professor's attempts to educate in a general sense. They see the time and money they spend on their children's education as an investment that is about to pay off...culminating in a career-type job in the world of professional media. They want their students to fit right into the working world. Students, tired of living off their parents support and their own dish washing or burger flipping, are intent upon a real job with real pay in the real world of media. An off campus internship or position of responsibility in a campus media facility is ostensible proof that they are making real progress toward that goal, both for their parents' sake and their own.

There are pressures from the media industry as well. There are often expectations that a steady supply of inexpensive or free labor is to be delivered from the media program to corporations or media facilities off campus. This is often true where companies support the program monetarily or in other ways. These companies will have interviewing sessions on campus to screen potential interns and get quite perturbed when the student sign-up sheet is not full. Other companies will offer tuition

"scholarships" for the winners of the internship contest and are appalled if there are few applicants. These attitudes pervade regardless of the quality of the internship experience offered by the company.

What do students need to bring to the experience?

As mentioned above, students should have a good conceptual and philosophical understanding of the relationship between the industry and society in general and its audience in particular. They need a background in the economics of the industry and the facility's role in the industry. Students should also know about the facility's relationship to its audience. In fact, this list could go on to include almost everything that is in our curriculum. We would like to have our students know about every major topic that is covered in coursework. The trade off is that some of our students will have to intern before they take most of the fourth year courses (second year in the major).

In addition to the media industry knowledge that professors want their students to have by the time they embark upon experiential learning, I think that students should have an attitude. At least an internal one. They need to bring an attitude that prevents them from blindly accepting the status quo. At a broadcast facility they should ask themselves questions like:

-What types of programming content are presented? Why?

-What role(s) do women and minorities have at the station?

-Are men and women equally represented on the air at various ages?

-Do advertisers (or other financial supporters of the facility) exert influence over program content or editorial stance?

-Are the processes used to create or disseminate program information efficient?

-Which technologies are being used appropriately? Are some being ignored?

-What will this industry and this facility be like five years from now? Ten years from now?

-Will the job that I am performing now be different in five years?

Students who ask themselves these questions and seek answers through observation and tactful questioning will significantly benefit from the internship experience.

Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner stated in 1969 that we need students who are experts at "crap detecting", a view reiterated by Don Wood (1993). Wood feels that professors have the responsibility to make sure that students are able to think...to challenge the status quo...to act independently. By the time a student is ready for an internship, that student is ready to think analytically using a broad base of knowledge. Students might have to be in the broadcast world during an internship, but not necessarily be of it. What they see at their internship site should be viewed neutrally...one way of accomplishing the dissemination of information, but not the best

or only way.

What Internship Agencies Should Offer

Lynn Gross's (1993) book, The Internship Experience, lists maximizing learning, supervision, a listing of formal and informal tasks, appropriate cautions and a method for evaluating the intern as the responsibilities of the internship supervising organization. The more completely these things are presented to the intern, the better. I would add a few things to the list.

First, I think that an intern should get a complete picture of the corporate structure of the facility and how the facility fits into the entire flow chart of the corporation or conglomerate that owns it. This would help the intern put into proper perspective some of the decisions made at the local level. For example, the decision not to spend heavily promoting the local newscasts when other stations in the market are spending huge amounts might be a corporate, not a local decision. This decision might be a result of cash flow problems caused by another station or other business entity owned by the corporation.

Second, interns should get experience in a wide variety of tasks and in a number of job categories. In a short period of time students should be able to say "I've done that," or "I've been a part of that process," or at least "I have seen that done before" during their internship. This boosts their confidence tremendously when they are ready for entry level job searching.

Third, interns need to have observational proximity to view technology, technical processes, creative work and decision making in addition to the everyday process of message construction and transmission. An intern should also gain an understanding of audience feedback to these messages. If possible, this information should go beyond typical ratings and include some qualitative information. If interns work on a corporate instructional video, they should be able to see some kind of measurement of the effectiveness of the message.

WORKSHOPS AND LABORATORIES

Not all students should take an off-campus internship. For some, it is not necessary for their future goals. Students who major in mass communication but expect to go to graduate school should concentrate more on classroom knowledge and skills. Students who cannot afford to live independently while interning or who do not have appropriate transportation might not be able to travel to an off campus internship. Other students who are locked into rigid work, rehearsal or athletic schedules do not have the flexibility needed for an off campus internship. Students who are simply undecided about their future should avoid a specific media facility experience in favor of a more basic or general experience.

These students can get experiential learning through workshops or laboratories. Many media education programs with in-house or student-run media facilities will offer course credit

for student work in these activities. At Florida State University's Dept. of Communication, the public relations students had the opportunity to get major course credit for publishing (under the supervision of a professor) a college newsletter/newspaper called Smoke Signals which was sent to alumni and various others on and off campus. At Northern Arizona University's School of Communication, students could get credit for working on the student radio station or student cable television operation. Although both of these operations were supervised by faculty, most of the day to day direct guidance and demonstration came from experienced students who managed the operation. Although not professional in a media industry sense, the experience of constructing messages and working with others in the process has an obviously professional orientation.

The above examples would generally be considered to be "workshop" and carry a variety of credit levels and experiences. Another experiential or practicum course would be the laboratory class. These classes are most often those that involve a variety of goals or at least changing of goals over time. The media laboratory often addresses a media related problem, such as the construction of a specific message or the use of a particular process, computer hardware or software to solve a problem. This type of experiential learning benefits those whose career interests have not yet crystallized and for those who do not feel that a career in traditional media organizations is attractive.

The emphasis of this type of class should be conceptual but with a practical application. This category of class appears to be growing in many programs and often incorporates multimedia and interactive media, desktop publishing and the use of computers such as the Amiga to create solutions to media problems usually solved by more expensive, dedicated use hardware. Media laboratory classes are meant for experimentation and this necessitates an experimental attitude that should be held both by the professor and the students.

How Assessment Fits In

Regardless of the type, length, amount of credit earned or location, the experiential learning situation is generally acknowledged as being salient to the student. A review of information gathered at exit interviews showed me (anecdotally) that students point to two things as "helping them most toward their career goals". The first was their advisor who usually helped the student complete the necessary graduation papers and often bailed them out of difficult situations. The second was the experiential learning that took place during the student's last two years. The modal response related to the student's experiences with a student run media facility. Not only did the facility provide a learning experience, but also a social environment that was rewarding. Students enjoyed the company of students with common interests and the commiseration with others who also suffer through deadlines or live newscasts.

External internships received mentions as well, however many students had not yet taken the internship when the exit interview was conducted. This does surface in alumni surveys, especially those of recent grads. The linkage between a college credit internship and a job at the facility after graduation is one of the most powerful and salient occurrences in a young person's experience. The program receives the "credit" for this.

Another important aspect of experiential learning is that it often leads to the creation of portfolio/resume tape material. Students who take workshops, laboratories or internships are far more likely to have the material needed for a portfolio (Orlik, 1993). In standard coursework similar material can be generated, but often with a small number of attempts per assignment and the process ending when the grade is given. Experiential situations usually require the student to continue trying until they get it right, or at least appropriate for that particular media facility.

The experiential learning situation presents an easy opportunity for faculty to assess the perceived value of the experience to the student. All students are required to turn something in at the end of an internship. This comes in the form of a paper, journal or both. It would be quite easy to make sure that the required paperwork also includes a survey that asks students to list what they liked or disliked about the experience. Students could also rate the perceived value of the experience and the tasks they performed. They could list the

tasks that they could not or were not allowed to perform. A student's perception of how their supervisors will evaluate them could be enlightening as well. In addition, a subjective, open ended evaluation of the experience can be very useful. This information should be used to help assess the value of the internship or experience to the student, the value of the experience to the curriculum and the appropriateness of the particular supervising organization.

Assessment is biased towards measurable things. Tangible results. Frequencies, crosstabulations. Things that the Board of Regents can hold in their collective hands. A hefty student portfolio is palpable evidence that a student has learned and accomplished something. Alumni comments or responses on a questionnaire that indicate that the program helped the student to find a career in the field cannot be ignored by those who review assessment information. Experiential learning not only provides some of the practical information that students need to get entry level jobs, but could also provide empirical information or "evidence" that the media program must have to justify its existence. Unfortunately, measuring the real products of an excellent media education program, e.g., a student's ability to think, is a much more difficult task.

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